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RUENAAA/CNO WASHINGTON DC
RHMFIUU/AFRICA CTR FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES WASHINGTON DC
RHMFIUU/NAVEURLOGCOORD CENTER NAPLES IT
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 COTONOU 001118

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

FOR AF GEN WARD, ADM ULRICH, AMB YATES, AMB CURRAN, RDML GREENE AND
MAJ GEN REMKES

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EWWT](#) [MARR](#) [MASS](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [BN](#)

SUBJECT: BENIN: SCENE SETTER FOR EUCOM AND NAVEUR PARTICIPATION IN
GULF OF GUINEA MINISTERIAL

REF: COTONOU 972

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Post welcomes your participation in the NAVEUR/ACSS-sponsored Gulf of Guinea Maritime Safety and Security (MSS) Ministerial Conference hosted by the Government of Benin (GOB) in Cotonou, November 13-15, 2006. Your visit highlights USG support for safety and security and initiatives in the Gulf of Guinea. The conference takes place under the aegis of Benin's new pro-US President Boni Yayi, elected in widely acclaimed free, fair and transparent March 2006 presidential elections, whose success many here attribute to the USG role.

2. (SBU) Your presence will reinforce existing strong bilateral relations as demonstrated by the new Millenium Challenge Compact (MCC) as well as ongoing USAID and Peace Corps programs. The US and Benin also enjoy a lively set of military-to-military cooperation, despite the lack of any resident DAO or ODC presence. Benin has been an active participant in multilateral peacekeeping missions, particularly in Cote d'Ivoire and DR Congo, having received extensive training from the US via ACOTA. You also will meet with the Minister of Defense. There is little anti-American sentiment, and the USG is very popular with the GOB, press, and general population. However, addressing corruption remains a major challenge, and petty crime plagues the population. END SUMMARY.

REGIONAL STABILITY AND MILITARY COOPERATION

3. (SBU) Entry into force in 2005 of an Article 98 agreement (which the GOB prefers to call a "non-surrender" agreement) has permitted us to significantly increase the tempo of military training and cooperation with the Beninese forces. Our IMET program restarted in FY06 and is focused on English-language training in addition to other general courses. The GOB also has expressed interest in nominating candidates for attendance at one or more of the war colleges. Unfortunately, it appears some in Washington plan to cut Benin's IMET budget in FY08 to zero. (NOTE: We are contesting this plan with Washington, and have not shared this information with the GOB. END NOTE.)

4. (SBU) Although a small country, Benin is a beneficiary of the Africa Contingency Operations Training Assistance (ACOTA) program and makes an important contribution to regional stability both through its example and commitments. Benin currently has over 1,200 peacekeeping troops deployed in the Democratic Republic of Congo

(MONUC) and in Cote d'Ivoire (UNOCI), as well as military and police observers in Darfur and Haiti. The Beninese Armed Forces have expressed a willingness to consider expanding its contribution in Darfur or elsewhere, but to do this the GOB would require USG support in terms of material, perhaps via FMF or GPOI funding.

15. (SBU) The Beninese Naval Forces struggle to conduct operations and, at present, consist of two Boston Whalers, one of which is inoperative. Two patrol boats have not been seaworthy in recent years, and are moored at the Port of Cotonou. This is another reason Benin would be an attractive prospect for FMF funding. The last U.S. vessel to call was the USS ELROD, which visited Cotonou at the end of September.

16. (SBU) The French and Belgians are actively cooperating with the Beninese military. The French also have approximately 20 officers who are seconded to the FAB and wear Beninese military uniforms. The French have said they actively support our maritime safety agenda in the Gulf of Guinea, and both the French and Beninese tell us that they are working to provide Benin with an AIS and ground-based radar system covering the entire Beninese coast. These systems may be operational in early 2007. A military delegation from China visited Benin in August of this year, and Chinese technicians are reported to be working to get one of Benin's two Chinese-made patrol boats back into seaworthy shape.

17. (SBU) Your visit comes in the wake of the successful execution of the Benin portion of MEDFLAG '06, the USEUCOM-sponsored ECOWAS military exercise that was held September 4-15. It involved the participation of nearly 60 U.S. military medical personnel and received broad press coverage (reftel).

SECURITY IN BENIN

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18. (U) Benin is rated HIGH for crime and MEDIUM for transnational terrorism. The community in general is affected most by street crime in all parts of Benin. There has been a slight increase in carjackings carried out by Beninese gangs over the past two years. There are no known terrorist organizations present in Benin, and the Beninese Government supports the United States in the War Against Terrorism. Embassy Benin enjoys a good working relationship with the local Police and Gendarmes. Nigerian-style 419 fraud is prevalent in Benin as well as the presence of counterfeit US currency and counterfeit Franc CFA.

KEY ISSUES: MAKING THE DEMOCRATIC DIVIDEND PAY

19. (SBU) Benin President Boni Yayi assumed office with a strong mandate, having won 75 percent of the run-off vote. Despite Benin's political stability, economic growth over the past several years has been disappointing. The country has few natural advantages or resources to spur growth or endow it with geopolitical strategic importance. It is only Benin's democratic tradition that has qualified Benin to feature on almost every list of beneficiaries for various aid programs such as Millennium Challenge, the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), HIPC debt relief, President Bush's Women's Justice and Empowerment Initiative, the EU's program of direct budget support, and the World Bank's Education Fast-Track Initiative.

110. (SBU) This "democratic dividend" is vital for Benin, but can only spur real economic growth if it is combined with improved economic governance. Botched privatizations of Benin's cotton and petroleum parastatals, Benin's largest export and import items, respectively, combined with difficult world market conditions for both products, have weighed heavily on Benin's economy over the past three years. Endemic corruption and inefficiencies in managing crucial infrastructure such as the Port of Cotonou, also negatively affect growth.

USG PROGRAMMING IN BENIN

¶11. (SBU) In February 2006, Benin signed a five-year, USD 307 million MCA Compact, which entered into force on October 6. President Yayi presided over an October 9 ceremony to mark the occasion. He underscored his Government's commitment to maintaining Benin's eligibility for the Compact program, notably by addressing the problem of endemic corruption. The Compact includes four main program areas: improving access to land, justice, financial services, and markets (which accounts for over half of the program and is predominantly to improve the functioning of the Port of Cotonou). Such aid to the Port is a serious need, as a recent US Coast Guard assessment found the Port does not currently meet ISPS standards.

¶12. (SBU) USAID and Peace Corps will continue their programs in key social sectors. USAID's programs are focused on primary health care and basic education. Peace Corps's programs focus on secondary education, health, environment, small business and information technology, with over 100 Volunteers are working countrywide.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF BENIN

¶13. (U) Benin's status as one of the most peaceful and democratic countries in Africa is a real achievement. In fact, Benin was the first African country to suffer from a military coup in the post-colonial era, and from 1963 to 1972 Benin saw more coups and changes of government than any other African state. From 1972 to 1989, under Mathieu Kerekou's "revolutionary" leadership, Benin lived under a Marxist regime that quickly became unsustainable with the end of the Cold War.

¶14. (U) Benin became a trailblazer in a more positive sense in 1990 when it was one of the first African countries to undergo a democratic transition. A new Constitution was adopted in December 1990, and, in elections in February 1991, Kerekou was defeated and peacefully stepped aside for new President Nicephore Soglo. But in

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1996 Kerekou resumed office after defeating Soglo in democratic